Tragedy: Love and Death in the Creative Imagination

How do you turn catastrophe, suffering, and death into art – and why? This first-year seminar in the humanities addresses such elemental questions, especially those centering on love and death. How does literature catch hold of catastrophic experiences and make them intelligible or even beautiful? Should misery even be beautiful? By exploring the tragic tradition in literature across many eras, cultures, genres, and languages, this course looks for basic patterns. The underlying question is even more fundamental: what is art for? Do we need it? Or is art simply a nonessential embellishment? The question of tragedy and the tragic should make possible answers accessible.

Texts:

Georg Büchner. Woyzeck. On LATTE.
Herman Melville, “Billy Budd.” Melville's Short Novels. Norton, 978-0393976410

Arthur Schopenhauer, World as Will and Representation. Excerpt on LATTE


**Schedule of Classes:**


   **Week 1: Gilgamesh**

2. Thurs. Aug. 31: *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

   Mon. Sept. 4: Labor Day, no class

3. Wed. Sept. 6: *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

4. Thurs. Sept. 7: Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*

   **Week 2: Aeschylus, The Oresteia**

5. Mon. Sept. 11: Aeschylus, *The Libation Bearers*


   **Week 3: Oedipus**


8. Mon. Sept. 18: *Oedipus*


   Thurs. Sept 21: Rosh Hashana, no class

   **Week 4: Antigone**

   **Close Reading Draft due: Sept. 25**


11. Wed. Sept. 27: *Antigonick*

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Week 5: Plato and Schopenhauer

**Close Reading Final Draft due Oct. 2**


   
   a. Vol. 1: §51
   c. Vol. 2, chapter 49 “On the Road to Salvation”

15. Wed. Oct. 4: Plato, Phaedo

Week 6: The Gospel of Mark

16. Mon. Oct. 9: *Mark*

17. Wed. Oct. 11 (Brandeis Thursday): *Mark*

Week 7: Shakespeare


19. Wed. Oct. 18: *King Lear*


   **Lens Essay draft due: Oct. 23**

Week 8: Racine


   **Lens Essay final draft due: Oct. 30**

Week 9: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Büchner


Week 10: Leskov and Melville

28. Wed. Nov. 8: Nietzsche, sections 14-18
29. Thurs. Nov. 9: Melville, Billy Budd
   Week 11: Chekhov
30. Mon. Nov. 13: Melville, Billy Budd
32. Mon. Nov. 16: The Seagull
   Week 12: Pritam
33. Mon. Nov. 20: Nietzsche, sections 19-21
   Wed. Nov. 22 and Thurs. Nov 23 No class (Thanksgiving)
34. Mon. Nov. 27: “The Skeleton” (latte): guest seminar leader, Prof. Harleen Singh
35. Wed. Nov. 29: Nietzsche, sections 22-25, plus pp. 3-12
   Research Paper draft due: Nov. 30
   Week 13: Soyinka Death and the King’s Horseman
36. Thurs. Nov. 30: Soyinka Death and the King’s Horseman
37. Mon. Dec. 4: Soyinka Death and the King’s Horseman
   Week 14: The Bacchae
   Research Paper final due: Dec. 11

Guiding Themes of the Seminar

• Why did traditional forms of tragic drama suddenly seem inadequate to so many artists in the emerging twentieth century?

• What is the nature of modern experience? Is it different from earlier varieties of experience – in the ancient or medieval world, in distant places -- or more or less the same?

• What is the precise relation between art and experience? Above all, what does aesthetic form have to do with experience?
• Does the advent of scientific, technologically progressive modernity mean we have, with modernism, reached the “end of art” as some commentators have supposed?

• Is the role of art decorative? Is it the badge of middle-class education? Or does it have some deeper, essential mission in modern life?

• What is a tragedy? Do they still exist or are they museum exhibits?

• Is the question of kitsch to be taken seriously, or is it just a matter of snobbery?

• What should we want from art? What do we want from art?

• What is the relationship between tragedy and religion?

• What role does collective experience play in tragedy? What role does individual subjectivity play?

Learning Goals:

This humanities seminar offers students an integrated, liberal arts experience in a small classroom setting. It presents the opportunity for a guided tour of established landmarks of tragic literature, but the real goal of the course is to learn how to find your way around art without a map. No reliable map even exists for tragedy as a form of expression. This is because in tragedy traditional assumptions about art begin to falter. In our seminar the emphasis falls on discussion rather than lecturing because the goal of the course is to learn how to think critically, speak cogently, and produce good arguments 1) verbally in class presentations, and 2) in written papers. You will analyzing, interpreting, and synthesizing knowledge on your feet, not taking notes and memorizing what the professor says is so. Our goals are to

1. Develop the habit of independent critique, intellectual self-reliance, and self-confidence from the perspective of attentive reading and collaborative discussion;

2. Become conversant with the major questions, concepts, theories, traditions, and techniques of humanistic enquiry vis-à-vis tragedy;

3. Grasp the difference between thinking without banisters or maps and the limitations of mere technique (relying on banisters and maps). Students will demonstrate critical reflection of context, audience comprehension and purpose in written and oral communication.

4. Reflect on quality peer-to-peer interaction.

5. Develop and sharpen writing skills through rigorous assignments.

Writing Assignments:
This course will satisfy the University Writing UWS requirement, and for that reason the writing assignments in this course are designed to bring out students’ full powers as authors in the Humanistic disciplines. The major papers are designed to build on each other, bringing into play increasingly advanced skills required in all University writing. Part of writing is re-writing, and therefore all of the assignments include opportunities for peer response and revision. There will be three major papers in this course, but each will include a rough draft as well as a final draft. Each paper will be due first to a small group of your class peers, who will read your paper and provide comments and reactions. Over the next week your group will meet outside of class to discuss your papers. Revised versions of your papers will be due to your instructors one week after the drafts were due.

Every student will make an appointment with one of the instructors during the week prior to turning in the first draft of each paper to discuss their paper (special office hours will be available for this purpose). With every first draft, students will include a one-page “cover letter” laying out their ambitions for their paper, its claim, its warrant, and its evidence.

The first paper (of 1000 to 1500 words) will be a "close reading" of a passage of your choosing (about twenty lines of verse or about 200 words of prose) from one of the assigned works. A close reading is not a paraphrase or a description but an analysis. The paper will turn upon something you have noticed in the text which strikes you as rich and interesting and full of a significance that might not be already obvious to every reader of that text, upon which you will base a coherent argument and complete argument about the text as a whole. In other words, you should not pick a passage that will enable you to repeat some point that has been already made in the lecture, but rather some passage which will enable you to bring a new reflection into our conversation, some passage that casts some new light upon the conversation we have already been having, some light that we might not have seen were it not for you. You will write a commentary on that passage, giving what you take its point to be, noting its context, and developing in cogent detail the claim it leads you to make about the text. Imagine that you are writing for someone who has some knowledge of the text but who does not know what precisely is your point of view about it --- someone rather like the other members of this class, for instance. This paper will be due to your writing group at the beginning of week 4, and to your instructor at the beginning of week 5.

The second paper (of 1500 to 2000 words) will be a more ambitious close reading project. You are to pick several passages, passages that seem somehow to engage each other, for close reading. They may be passages from different but related works, or different passages from a longer work. How the passages engage each other is yours to determine. One may seem to retract the other, to add a new complication to the other, to qualify the other, to extend it into a new area by analogy, or cause one to rethink the point the first passage seemed to be informed by. This paper will be due to your writing group at the beginning of week 8, and to your instructor at the beginning of week 9.

For the third paper (of 1500 to 2000 words), you must engage the critical literature about one of the texts from the course. You should bring at least two secondary texts to bear on the primary...
You should make yourself familiar with the criticism on your text, first, by cruising through the subject index headings about the author on OneSearch, and second, by using a finding aid such as the MLA International Bibliography. This paper will be due to your writing group at the beginning of week 12, and to your instructor during the exam period.

Other Assignments:

- **Preparing a Protokoll:**
  Students are required to keep a record of the minutes for one seminar meeting. This assignment is a graded writing assignment. You must observe the same pieties as in any formal paper.

  1. Length: about one page, single spaced.
  2. Due: The day of the class meeting after the class on which you are reporting.
  3. Oral Reading: You will read you protocol aloud at the beginning of the next class meeting. At that time your classmates will have the opportunity to ask for corrections or revisions. Once the paper is complete to everyone's satisfaction, your instructor will post it on the WebCT site for the course.

- **Group Oral Presentation:**
  Every student will, in groups of two, prepare a brief oral presentation and lead a discussion about one of our texts.

Course Policies

- **Attendance**
  Students will be allowed two unexcused absences. Any other absences will have an impact on a student's final grade.

- **Grading**
  Your final grade will be broken down as follows: 30% for the final paper, 15% for the oral presentation; 15% for the first paper, 20% for the second paper, and 20% for participation.

- **Student Participation Grades:**
  
  A: Students who receive an A for participation come to every class. They have not only read the assigned texts and watched the movies, but also thought about them and formulated questions to ask and issues to raise. They take risks in discussion by sharing thoughts or positions about
which they are not 100% certain. Moreover, A students listen and respond thoughtfully to issues raised by other students.

B: Students who receive a B for participation have completed all the reading and film assignments on time, but do not always come to class with questions in mind and do not put much independent thought into the readings. B students wait for someone else to take the lead. They participate, but only occasionally.

C: C students attend class, complete the assignments, and listen attentively to the discussions, but rarely participate unless directly asked a question.

D and E: Students who fail to complete the assignments, fail to participation in classroom discussion, who are unable to answer questions when called upon, fail to bring their readings and notes to class, or are frequently late, absent, asleep, or doing work for other classes during class periods will receive a D or lower for their participation grade.

• The Fine Print:

4 credit hours: Success in this 4 credit hour course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week in preparation for class (readings, papers, discussion sections, preparation of protocols, etc.).

Disabilities: If you have documented disability on file at Brandeis University, please let us know so that the appropriate accommodations can be arranged.